DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 274 037 EA 018 793

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TITLE "Quality Circles": A Strategy for Personal and Curriculum Development. Coombe Lodge Working Paper. Information Bank Number 1803.
INSTITUTION Further Education Staff Coll., Blagdon (England).
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Development; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Motivation; Organizational Climate; *Participative Decision Making; *Problem Solving; *Quality Circles; Self Actualization; *Staff Development; *Staff Meetings; *Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS Great Britain

ABSTRACT

Quality circles attempt to satisfy both task and personal needs through staff involvement in solving work-related problems. This paper summarizes quality circle theory, applies it to school settings, and suggests a framework for introducing the process to educational institutions. After briefly defining quality circles, the article presents two examples of such programs at a British college. Individual reasons for circle membership are then examined, F. Herzberg's motivators are listed and described, and resistance to circle membership is briefly discussed. When established voluntarily with opportunities for participants to influence outcomes, quality circles can help individuals satisfy self-actualization, recognition, and affiliation needs. To introduce quality circles, managers must make appropriate arrangements and encourage a fertile, innovative organizational climate. Open discussion is the best strategy. In less trusting environments, staff linkages for specific tasks might work. To ensure success, egalitarian rules need to be adopted that focus on ideas and products and ignore individuals' hierarchical status. The leader's sensitivity and interpersonal skills crucially impact a circle's effectiveness. The process is useful for increasing staff involvement, supporting individual performance, developing curricula, and building teams. (MLH)

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"QUALITY CIRCLES"

A STRATEGY FOR PERSONAL AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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March 1983

EA 018 793

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QUALITY CIRCLES : A STRATEGY FOR PERSONAL & CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

All educational establishments arrange their staff into formal groups which they combine in different ways to carry out the tasks necessary to satisfy the needs of their students.

In the process of carrying out their formal tasks these groups begin to operate in such a way that they also satisfy some of the personal psychological needs of their members. Examples of these are the need for affiliation, the maintenance of self-esteem, security and so on.

The ability to combine and satisfy both sets of needs is more likely to be successful if the organisation is arranged into small groups of staff who identify closely with one another and with the success of the task which they are required to achieve.

Given that in educational institutions the role of management is that of guiding the efforts of its staff towards the satisfaction of student needs, then it must seek to create an atmosphere which encourages the groups to use all their potential resources to the advantage of students. At the same time management must ensure that a correct balance is maintained between both sets of needs so that the groups do not seek, for example, to satisfy the personal needs of their members at the expense of the needs of the task for which they are responsible.

One technique, which attempts to satisfy both task and personal needs through a planned process of staff involvement in the solution ofproblems affecting their work, is known as quality circles.

Although much of the publicity surrounding the use of this technique has been about its use in industrial situations, variations of it have been evolving for some time in the field of further education, particularly in the areas of curriculum and staff development.

The aim of this paper is to bring together the theory on which the technique of quality circles is based and some of the practical experience gained in its use in curriculum and personal development.

The paper is therefore offered as a tentative framework for the use of quality circles in further education.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE TECHNIQUE

The concepts on which quality circles are based were first researched by social scientists in this country. These original ideas were based on the theory of "semi-autonomous groups". The groups were formed in such a way that their members had some control or influence over the methods of achieving their task. This facility to control or influence the methods of task achievement created an opportunity for higher levels of individual motivation through personal needs satisfaction.

The original concepts were adopted and developed by other countries, especially Japan and Sweden, and have been successfully applied in many industrial concerns in both countries.

The technique continued to evolve more slowly in this country and it is only recently that it has attracted much attention.

In the field of education the technique has proved to be particularly useful for supporting and improving individual performance, for curriculum innovation and development and for team building.

WHAT ARE QUALITY CIRCLES?

Quality circles are small groups of people who do similar work and meet regularly to discuss ways of improving how they do that work. In practice this means groups of teaching staff meeting to discuss ways of carrying out and improving their work. These groups provide a better framework for the satisfaction of task and personal needs when they have the following characteristics :

- groups have between five and twelve members and meet on a voluntary basis.
- members agree between themselves which rules they wish to apply to the conduct of their meetings.
- meetings are programmed at regular intervals and, to avoid the development of talking shops, are best restricted to between one and one-and-a-half hours.
- leadership of meetings need not be static and may be allowed to change in response to the needs of the topic being discussed. A leadership rota covering all members in turn may also be used.
- programmes are agreed in advance by identifying the problems which members wish to tackle and are published for at least six weeks ahead. However the approach to meetings must be flexible and allow problems to be discussed as and when they arise.
- circles go about their business by using systematic methods of analysis.
- the dangers of frustration are avoided by ensuring that members clearly know the limits of the authority which has been delegated to them. For example groups may often have full authority to implement curriculum development changes but only the power to make recommendations on improvement in administration or changes in resource requirements.

Two examples of these kinds of groups are described below. They have been selected because they show two entirely different methods of circle application.

Example 1 ; Quality Circle for Social & Life Skills Staff

This circle operates with around twelve members who meet regularly at 7 p.m. on Wednesday evenings, in their own time, to discuss aspects of their work and ways of improving it. The group has developed the following mode of operation which the members feel offers them the maximum opportunity for open discussion in a non-threatening way.

- The leader for the evening presents the subject being considered to the full group (this will have been identified by the group at an earlier session). This usually involves outlining the problem in general terms - questions are restricted to clarification of the issues and not discussion of the problem.

- The group then breaks up into threes/fours to discuss the problem in detail and to identify likely solutions. These are listed on a large sheet of paper. The person offering a solution is not identified in any way.

- The full group then re-assembles and the large sheets of paper are then pinned to the wall for display. A full discussion then follows around the suggested solutions.

- The original small groups then re-assemble to narrow down and select their ideal or best suited solution which is again outlined on a large sheet of paper.

- During the final full group session these solutions are again discussed by the large group and where agreement is possible one solution is adopted for use by circle members.

- Following the meeting the solutions are written up and distributed to all staff associated with the teaching of social and life skills.

A section of the circle's programme is shown below.

1. Participatory session on the place of craft activities in S.L.S. (Leader J.S.).
2. Evaluation and planning session (group discussion).
3. The place of counselling (Leaders L.T. & H.S.).
4. Job search activities (Leaders K.W. & P.C.).
5. Possibilities for drama / role play in S.L.S. (Leaders A.G. & P.W.)
6. Things that have worked (Leaders A.H. & N.F.).
7. Evaluation and planning (group discussion).
8. Tackling literacy problems (Leader E.M.).

Example 2 : Quality Circle for General Studies Staff

This circle operates with five members who meet every Friday morning in College time to discuss ways of improving their work. Timetables have been arranged to ensure that the non-teaching time is co-ordinated for circle meetings. There is a high level of trust in the group which has evolved the following method of operating.

- Each member brings to the circle meeting an item of work which they want to discuss or try out on other circle members.

- Through open discussion the work is evaluated and amended if necessary before adoption by other circle members.

Recent items discussed or tried out include :

- Use of simulation games in communications.
- The design of B.E.C. assignments.
- Evaluation of assignments
- Role playing.
- Video projects for communication skills.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND CIRCLE MEMBERSHIP

An individual's reasons for actively participating in a circle are as diverse as there are people. However the following are generalised reasons.

Fear of an imposed need for change can be a major influence in the decision to take up circle membership. This is particularly true where these changes affect the relevance or currency of an individual's present knowledge or require an individual to adopt new and untried teaching methods or to move into uncharted course structures. Examples of these kinds of external threats originated for many staff with the introduction of T.E.C., B.E.C., and M.S.C. courses. In these situations the changes were perceived by some staff as threatening and resulted in the development of feelings of insecurity.

Although this insecurity may not always be externally displayed as, for example, in outward restistance to change, it may give rise to the internal development of safety needs which encourage the individual to seek the protection of others through membership of a group. This is particularly true where staff have been faced with a forced change which disturbs the stability of the existing system in which they operate.

If individuals are to get the best out of circle membership they must both perceive and accept (even with varying degrees of resistance) the need to change their current methods of working. Involvement must therefore be based on an acceptance that the circle process will include the evaluation of current practice and the factors which influence it.

It is often much easier for staff to come to terms with the need to implement changes which originate from outside their personal perception than from those which originate from self-evaluation.

In situations where the individual's perception of the need for change is not the result of known external pressures but is instead built on the results from self-motivated activity, it is often much more difficult to understand why staff are anxious to join in circle activities.

Observation of circles in operation suggests that they generate a considerable amount of personal need satisfaction for those taking part in their activities. It is worth considering what this satisfaction might be and how it influences a circle's operation.

Current levels of understanding propose that self-motivation is based on drives originating from some internally perceived need to change our existing state. These needs may be positive in the sense that they drive someone towards a new objective, or negative in the sense of driving one away from a particular conditiom an individual is seeking to avoid.

Of the many conceptual frameworks put forward to help us to analyse and understand these drives, the one proposed by Herzberg (1) has been selected. Using the labels provided by Herzberg it is possible to construct an argument based on personal need satisfaction through involvement in circle activities.

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(1) Herzberg, F. "Work and the Nature of Man", World Publishing Co., 1966.

Herzberg's Motivators		Satisfaction from Circle Membership
1. Achievement	.....	Self-fulfilment through one's contribution to the successful completion of a task, especially if one has been involved in the initiation and design of the method of carrying out the task.
2. Recognition	.....	The recognition of the value of one's contribution by peers and later by others outside the circle.
3. Work itself	.....	Involvement in the design and composition of how one is to carry out work leads to greater security and satisfaction.
4. Responsibility	.....	The possession of delegated authority given to circles increases involvement in decision making and gives an increased sense of being responsible for the group's achievements.
5. Advancement	.....	Both for individuals and the group through an improvement in the status and authority of the circle members.

The argument would run that needs can be satisfied through the group activity associated with the dynamics generated by circle membership. When operating outside the circle individuals will take support from knowing that they have the agreement of others on the approach and materials being used.

However the flaw in the argument is that as with other frameworks Herzberg's motivators are based on the drives of individuals and not groups. It could therefore be argued that a stronger individual drive would be present when a person is working alone and can perceive a direct link between their own activities and success.

Resistance to Membership

Membership of a quality circle will not suit the needs of every member of staff and some will continue to prefer working on their own initiative.

Perhaps this independence is rooted in the nature of our educational system which has traditionally emphasised individual achievement. A consequence of this is that some individuals will often actively seek to avoid involvement in collaborative activity because they believe the results are less praiseworthy than individual effort.

Yet at the same time as seeking individualism some will be seeking to satisfy the need for affection, friendship and belonging through association with others.

Here lies the inherent dilemma of how to achieve the individual needs for self-actualisation and safety and at the same time become involved in a group process which satisfies the needs for recognition and belongingness.

Experience shows that if they are set up properly with voluntaryism and the opportunity for individuals to influence outcomes then the processes associated with taking part in circle activity can to some extent satisfy both sets of needs.

INTRODUCING QUALITY CIRCLES

The role of management

If the technique is to be introduced and developed then management must support the groups by making the necessary arrangements for them to meet and function effectively. Having made these arrangements the extent to which the circles may develop and realise their full potential will depend considerably on the management's style of operation and on the organisational climate which this produces.

To be fully successful the management style must encourage the fertile climate required for innovation. It must accept the controlled risk involved in allowing decisions to be delegated to circle level. Management must realise that if the circles are to make a meaningful contribution, they must be perceived by staff to be more than an extension of the concept of suggestion boxes, in the sense that they must be allowed to follow up their ideas and put them into practice. Therefore, whether circles are being implemented to cover the whole organisation or within the boundaries of a department, they are less likely to be successful if the organisational climate or management style is based on either a centralised or authoritarian approach to decision making.

It should be appreciated that not all activities lend themselves to the use of the circle technique and those college managements which are able to use them successfully tend to be very careful when taking decisions about the tasks which are delegated to the circles.

Perhaps the most important factor in determining whether or not to use a circle for making curriculum decisions is an assessment of why and how the decisions are to be implemented. Individuals are far more likely to carry out a decision which they have been able to influence through circle membership rather than having it imposed upon them by management. Giving staff the opportunity to influence decisions is one reason for using the circle technique.

If the delegated initiation of curriculum change is to be effective it must be supported by good two-way communications between the different levels of the organisation. These communications must ensure that both the management and those taking part in the circles understand, share and work towards the same objectives.

Strategies for introduction

If the decision to introduce circles into the organisation has been taken then the strategy for their introduction needs to be carefully considered.

The choice of strategy will be determined by the organisation's history and experience of using groups, the nature of the task to be assigned to the circles, the people who will make up the groups, their attitudes towards group membership and the availability of necessary leadership skills.

Where the organisational climate is right then a straight-forward strategy of open discussion can be adopted using the following steps. These would be amended to suit whether the introduction is on a department or a college basis.

- discuss the concept with Heads of Department or section leaders and gain their support for the introduction of a pilot scheme.
- at the same time involve unions in these discussions and gain their understanding and agreement.

- working with Heads of department or section leaders, identify likely areas where circles could be introduced andpotential circle leaders.

- agree the area of the organisation in which the pilot scheme will take place.

- hold a briefing meeting with the staff likely to be involved, explaining the objectives of circles and guidelines for taking part in them. At this meeting identify volunteers/leaders and form first circle groupings.

- hold a training session for circle leaders and role play a circle meeting.

- make the necessary organisational arrangements for circle meetings to take place. Decide whether meetings will take place in or outside college time.

- establish first circles and get them to agree ;-

  (a) their method of operation,

  (b) their first six weeks programme.

- assist circles in publishing their work.

- evaluate and monitor progress, reporting to interested parties. Help with the correction of problems.

- if the scheme is working, develop and extend circles.

- review annually (each academic year).

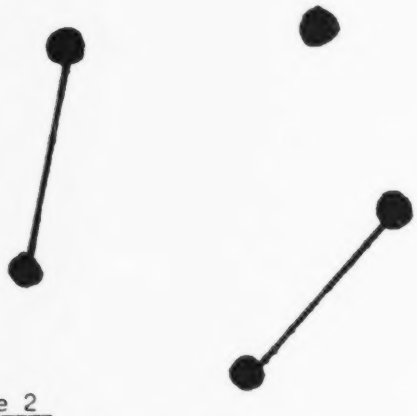
An alternative strategy will need to be adopted in situations where the existing relationships between individuals are weak or where they have deteriorated to the point where people are unwilling to work collectively with one another.

Any attempt to introduce circle methods quickly in these circumstances will tend to be met with resistance and result in only limited success. Indeed any forced introduction of the technique may have a detrimental effect and actually increase the levels of frustration in individual members of the group due to lack of success.

However, despite the problems, it is possible to introduce the technique based on team building methods. In most situations the drive to satisfy individual psychological needs will be present and there will be a tendency for one or two members of staff to want to work together for mutual support. Where this preferred bond between individuals can be identified it can be used to bring two or more members of the group together formally to undertake a specific curriculum task.

This linking of staff can normally be done at different points in the organisation and strengthened by ensuring that credit is given to the combined efforts of those concerned. Once the original linking has been established it can be used as the nucleus to join others together on a planned basis by identifying tasks which involve the combined interest of the new grouping. As the level of trust is developed others may be added to form a complete circle.

The technique is shown graphically below.

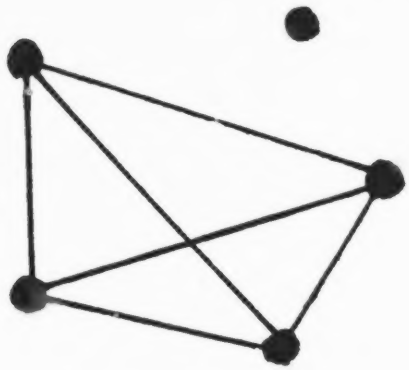


Stage 1

Linking two or more individuals together at different points in the organisation to carry out a specific task.

Stage 2

Building onto the original links by bringing more staff together and establishing tasks which can be achieved by the new groupings.



Stage 3

In the final stage, tasks are set which require all the members of the groups to work together.
It is important that if success is achieved then praise must be given to the whole group and not to individuals.

The final and most productive group is the 'normal' quality circle which can be seen in Stage 3.

The essence of using the linking strategy is that time is allowed for trust to be developed and spread through a series of steps which lead to the formation of a complete circle.

As the level of personal need satisfaction is increased the trust in the circle technique grows to the point where it is acceptable within the organisation.

RULES WITHIN CIRCLES

If those taking part in the circles are to feel comfortable when operating within them and take from them the psychological support which they can offer, they must be free to develop their own rules and mode of operation. These form the framework in which members can most happily work and contribute to the circle's effectiveness. For example, during the early stages of its operation a circle may lay down quite tight parameters for its operation, such as :

- the only concern will be with curriculum matters, administration will not be considered.
- each session must produce an activity, lesson or set of materials for use in the classroom.
- status in meetings will not be based on hierarchical position.

As the level of trust develops circles may be much freer in their rules and discuss much wider issues. The key point is that decisions on operating methods must be left to the needs of the situation under which the circles are working.

Whatever the official rules established by circles they soon begin to develop their own culture and mode of operation. In developing these group norms a circle's first priority will be that of establishing trust between members.

Without this development of mutual trust members will not be open in their discussions and will tend to keep what they think to themselves. To help with the development of trust circle leaders should be encouraged to adopt the following guidelines when conducting circle discussions :

- get the group to concentrate on ideas and not people.
- suspend judgement; what might appear to be an unworkable idea may, if it is added to and developed to fruition, be the breakthrough being looked for.
- separate the production of ideas from their evaluation. Concentrate on quantity first and quality second by leaving evaluation until later.
- all suggestions are encouraged, no matter how far-fetched, as they may act as the trigger for more practical suggestions.
- laugh with and not at ideas or people.
- beware of self-imposed barriers such as :
  - not challenging the obvious,
  - looking for just one right answer,
  - conforming,
  - evaluating too quickly,
  - fear of looking foolish.

CIRCLE EFFECTIVENESS

Whether a circle works effectively towards the needs of the curriculum and at the same time satisfies the psychological needs of its members will depend to a large extent on its composition and the resources available to it. If the mixture is wrong then frustration may set in and psychological failure take place.

The following factors are important contributors to a circle's effectiveness :

- the group should have the resources necessary to achieve its task.
- members must all agree with the objectives towards which the circle is working and develop a consensus on basic values.
- the circle should have the skills and abilities necessary for the successful completion of the task.
- interpersonal communication must be good and not hindered by status.
- in circles made up of members from different parts of the organisation care must be taken to ensure that members are not more concerned about the needs of the group they left rather than with the needs of the group they are joining.

In assessing a circle's effectiveness it must be remembered that groups are not static and that an important role for management is in helping them to lift their level of competence through training and support.

One major factor affecting the circle's ability to achieve its tasks and at the same time satisfy the psychological needs of its members is that of the sensitivity and skill of the circle's leader in identifying the group's problems and in developing ways of overcoming them.

The levels of sensitivity and skill can be improved through training and personal development. The way in which new members are brought into the group is also important and needs careful handling.

It is wrong to expect individuals to function quickly or automatically as an effective group. It may not be that the group is ineffective but rather that it has not developed any cohesion and has continued as a mere aggregate of individuals. If this situation develops then outside facilitators may be necessary to bring the group together.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to provide a framework for the introduction of quality circles into educational organisations. As with any other management technique they do not offer any panaceas for curing educational ills.

Their usefulness depends on them being used in appropriate situations and having the right kind of management support.

It should be remembered that their main aim is to improve the 'quality of the product' offered to students. However, the technique is also useful for obtaining staff involvement, supporting individual performance, curriculum development and for team building.